

To Oslo, Via Vilnius

By John Budris

Few Champagne corks popped in Lithuania at the news of Mikhail Gorbachev's Nobel Peace Prize.

Consider his record in the last six months: Lithuania declares a restoration of independence and the Soviet Army invades Vilnius with tanks and paratroops. The Russians seize printing presses and Government offices and drag frightened boys back into the Red Army.

There are MIG overflights, helicopters scatter more pro-Soviet propaganda leaflets than Vermont has maple leaves. Western journalists are expelled and the press blackout begins.

These are hardly things one would expect from Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer or Mohandas K. Gandhi.

When the Lithuanians still refuse to rescind their declaration of independence, Mr. Gorbachev orders a blockade that ruins the economy, and though he officially lifts it after his summit meeting with President Bush, he continues it in subtle but paralyzing ways.

Even conservative estimates put the damage to Lithuania's economy as a result of the blockade in the billions of dollars and still counting. Simple good sportsmanship suggests that Mr. Gorbachev donate his \$700,000 prize to help offset what his embargo has created.

"If Moscow thinks that we owe them something for independence, our bill has already been paid in advance," said the Prime Minister, Kazimiera Prunskiene. Even today, Mr. Gorbachev keeps hacking away at Lithuania to join a federated Soviet Union.

A recent deal between Mr. Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian Republic, has all the necessary ingredients to undermine trade agreements between Lithuania and the Federation — agreements that were intended to release Lithuania as Moscow's economic hostage.

Beginning in 1991, Moscow threatens hard currency payments from Lithuania for much commercial trade. The indispensable industrial triad of crude oil, natural gas and metals could be the first, and, coming in winter, would create conditions far worse than the spring blockade. Deliveries for the current quarter's goods, particularly medical supplies, are not guaranteed. These tactics are

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Riding a tank to the Nobel.

nothing short of blackmail

Tanks still casually patrol downtown Vilnius each evening, and several key buildings seized by the Soviet Army in March have yet to be returned to the Lithuanians.

In southeastern Lithuania, the Lithuanian Communist Party, funded by Moscow, continues to provoke ethnic unrest among Poles and Russians under Mr. Gorbachev's direction. Contrary to the Lithuanian Constitution, local councils still controlled by the Communist old guard recently declared two districts as autonomous regions.

These stunts, encouraged by Mr. Gorbachev, are inconsistent with the Nobel Prize. In a telegram of congratulations, in which he addressed Mr. Gorbachev as "Your Majesty," Lithuania's President, Vytautas Landsbergis, himself a nominee for the prize, expressed hope that the award would "widen neighborly relations between the Soviet Union and Lithuania and help restore Baltic independence."

So it is still not too late for Mr. Gorbachev to deserve what he has already won.

Along with his power to dissolve republics' governments and install presidential rule comes great, if not exclusive, control over negotiations with Lithuania. Though it is the impression of the Western press that his power in the Soviet Union is slipping, his personal grip on Lithuania has not loosened.

The first round of talks between the Soviet Union and Lithuania ended with Moscow willing, in principle, to bargain. But in private Mr. Gorbachev's position is quite the opposite. He views Lithuania as his colony, scoffs at its confidence in the influence of the West to help it during the negotiations and will let it go only when compelled to do so.

Few opportunities have been missed to pamper Mr. Gorbachev, the world's darling, and the Nobel Prize is yet another example. Unless he reverses his position and releases Lithuania with no strings attached, and soon, this will be the year he rode a tank through Vilnius on his way to Oslo. □

